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The Frick Savors the Opulence of Emptiness

No barriers. No texts. No heavy gold fabric. At the museum's two-year sublet of the Breuer building on Madison Avenue, it's just you and the masters.

Jason Farago

"Progress of Love" panels from the Fragonard Room at the Frick Mansion were transported to the Breuer building and illuminated by the trapezoidal window.Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times
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  8 min read

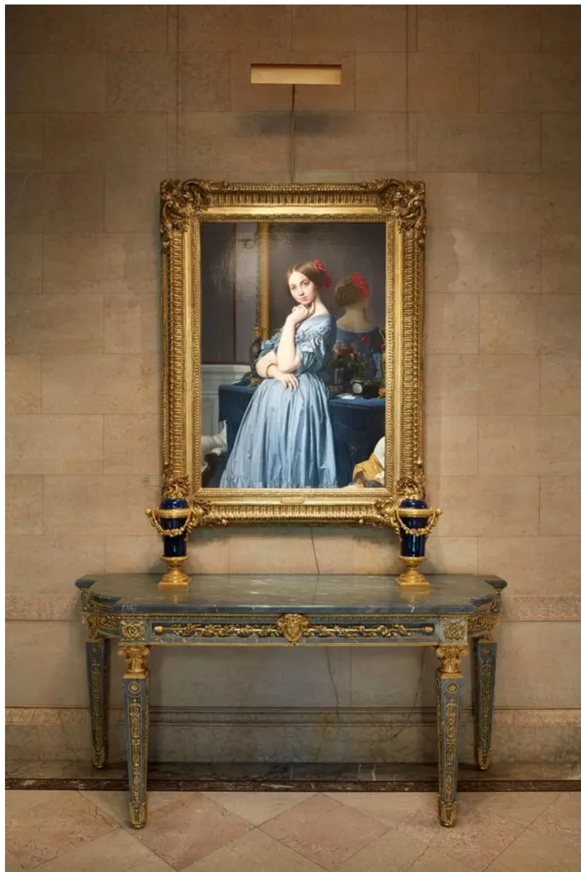
Yesterday's robber barons lived like princes; today, they'd rather be monks.

When the union-crushing coke and steel magnate Henry Clay Frick left Pittsburgh for New York in 1905, he built himself a Beaux-Arts townhouse the width of a city block, encased in marble and mahogany, trimmed with velvet and gold. The museum it now houses on Fifth Avenue is expanding: the house's upstairs living quarters will open to the public, and there will be an addition designed by Annabelle Selldorf, the New York architect of understated rigor. But to prepare, the Frick Collection has to move out for two years — and in a sublet five blocks north, it's discovering the more modern luxury of blank walls and empty rooms.

Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times

“After finding Nothingness, I have found Beauty,” Mallarmé wrote. And so it is at Frick Madison: an unexpectedly audacious transmutation of the city’s plushest museum within Marcel Breuer’s home for the Whitney Museum of American Art. Recently occupied by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brutalist building at 945 Madison Ave. reopens March 18 as an old masters gallery, with 104 of the Frick’s paintings, plus marbles and bronzes and vases and clocks.

The backdrop is gray, the lighting sober. No barriers. No protective glass. No descriptive texts. (And no selfies, either — as at the mother ship, at Frick Madison photography is banned too.) New York’s most majestic Bellini, most lavish Rembrandt, most sharply cut Ingres have been unencumbered, made strange. Frick Madison is European art history distilled, and it’s a swaggering wager on the collection’s sufficiency and an audience’s attention span. You can study up via print, app or video, but your primordial task here is to look, look, look.



Credit...The Frick Collection, New York; Michael Bodycomb

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“We’re doing the opposite of what the house does,” Xavier F. Salomon, the Frick’s deputy director and chief curator, tells me during one of three visits I made this winter to the reinstallation. For the next two years, these artworks appear not as elements of a residence, but are reordered by geography and medium. Dutch and Flemish painting get the second floor, which culminates with all eight of the Frick’s Van Dycks and a snug room for its three Vermeers. The third floor is the province of Italy and Spain, but also Mughal carpets and Chinese porcelain.

Floor four is Britain and France, where Breuer’s massive trapezoidal window illuminates the four panels of Fragonard’s blithe “Progress of Love,” a Rococo fête of countryside hooking up. The gallery is a modernist showstopper, though not without historical grounding; Madame du Barry, Louis XV’s mistress, commissioned the panels for a pleasure palace whose window was placed in roughly the same location. “That window at Louveciennes looked out onto the Seine,” Salomon says. “Now you look out to the Apple Store across Madison Avenue …”

Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times

This new setting isn’t just unusual. It’s unprecedented, since the Frick, by longstanding tradition, has not lent pictures bequeathed by its founder to other institutions. Frick Madison is therefore the first, and probably only, time that many of these artworks will ever be on view outside the sumptuous confines of 1 East 70th Street.

I'd only ever seen Holbein's flinty portraits of the two Thomases, More and Cromwell (the "Wolf Hall" rivals), on either side of Frick's fireplace; here, they face off in their own gallery. In the mansion, the museum's larger pictures by Van Dyck or Velázquez hang above wainscoting; Ingres's razor-edged portrait of the Comtesse d'Haussonville is protected by a table of marble and gilt bronze. At the Breuer they've been brought down to eye level. You can almost walk into them. (Hence another negative rule: no children under 10.)

Frick Madison began, like so many good New York stories, with a lucky break on a rental. "I went around all the major museums, kind of cup in hand, looking for some space," says Ian Wardropper, the Frick's director since 2011. "Richard Armstrong offered me the Guggenheim, which would have been fascinating, but it was only for four months."

Credit...The Frick Collection; Michael Bodycomb

Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times

He contacted his old colleagues at the Metropolitan, which had leased the Breuer building from the Whitney until 2023. “Everybody knew the Met was having financial troubles, and having troubles running all those exhibitions. So I thought, maybe, they’d give me a floor,” Wardropper said. “But, very quickly, we got into negotiations for the whole thing. And that changed the whole ballgame. Because suddenly, it was not just an opportunity to show a few works, but to really rethink the collection for a couple of years.”

When the deal came through, Salomon says, “I felt totally relieved that the collection could be on view. And totally terrified: What the hell am I going to do with this space?” (We were talking through our masks in the half-complete Italian galleries. The Frick staggered its crews in case of infection, and sometimes curators supervised the installation via FaceTime.) But the Frick already had a partner in Selldorf, who knew the collection intimately after years planning the museum’s fourth attempt at expansion and renovation.

Breuer’s gridded ceiling dictates much of the flow. “The concrete ceiling creates a kind of module that you want to respect,” Selldorf says. “It’s such a strong building. It’s not like you can argue it away.” Along with the Frick’s longstanding designer, Stephen Saitas, she contrived a sequence of walls (often left blank) noticeably thicker than those the Whitney or Met used, and paint jobs in a narrow band of slate to gunmetal. “White,” Salomon tells me, “is the kiss of death for old masters.”

Credit...The Frick Collection; Michael Bodycomb

Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times

The fusty Frick, gone minimal? It may surprise you, but this place has the youngest curatorial team of any major museum in New York, led by Salomon, 42, and Aimee Ng, 39. Last year, they achieved sudden digital fame for “Cocktails with a Curator,” an on-the-fly pandemic YouTube series that pairs paintings with libations, and which became appointment viewing at Friday martini hour. More than a million viewers have tuned in to watch Salomon unpack the history of Velázquez’s royal commissions (while drinking sherry), or to hear Ng analyze gender depictions in 18th-century English portraiture (while drinking Pimm’s).

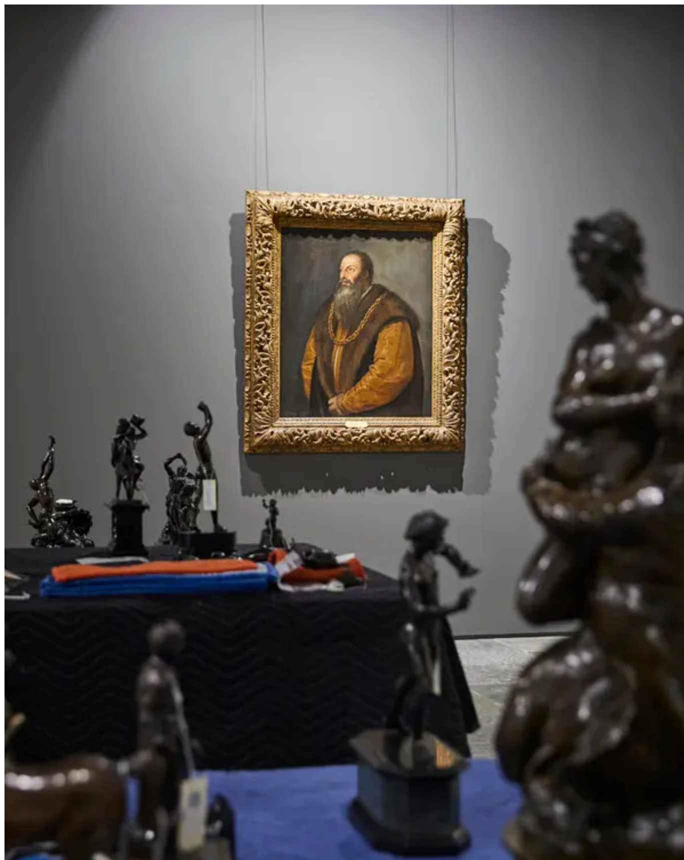
The cocktail hour, Ng says, has “transformed what we do in writing, with footnotes, into something that’s much more accessible.” They now get stopped in the street by Renaissance art fans, though the alcoholic accompaniment may have loosened the tongues of their most devoted watchers.

“I mean, it’s overwhelmingly positive,” Salomon says. “But you always get the comment of ‘I don’t like the sweater you’re wearing today....’”

Ng: “Or, ‘You touch your hair too much. You should smile less.’”

Salomon: “I got, ‘You should smile more!’”

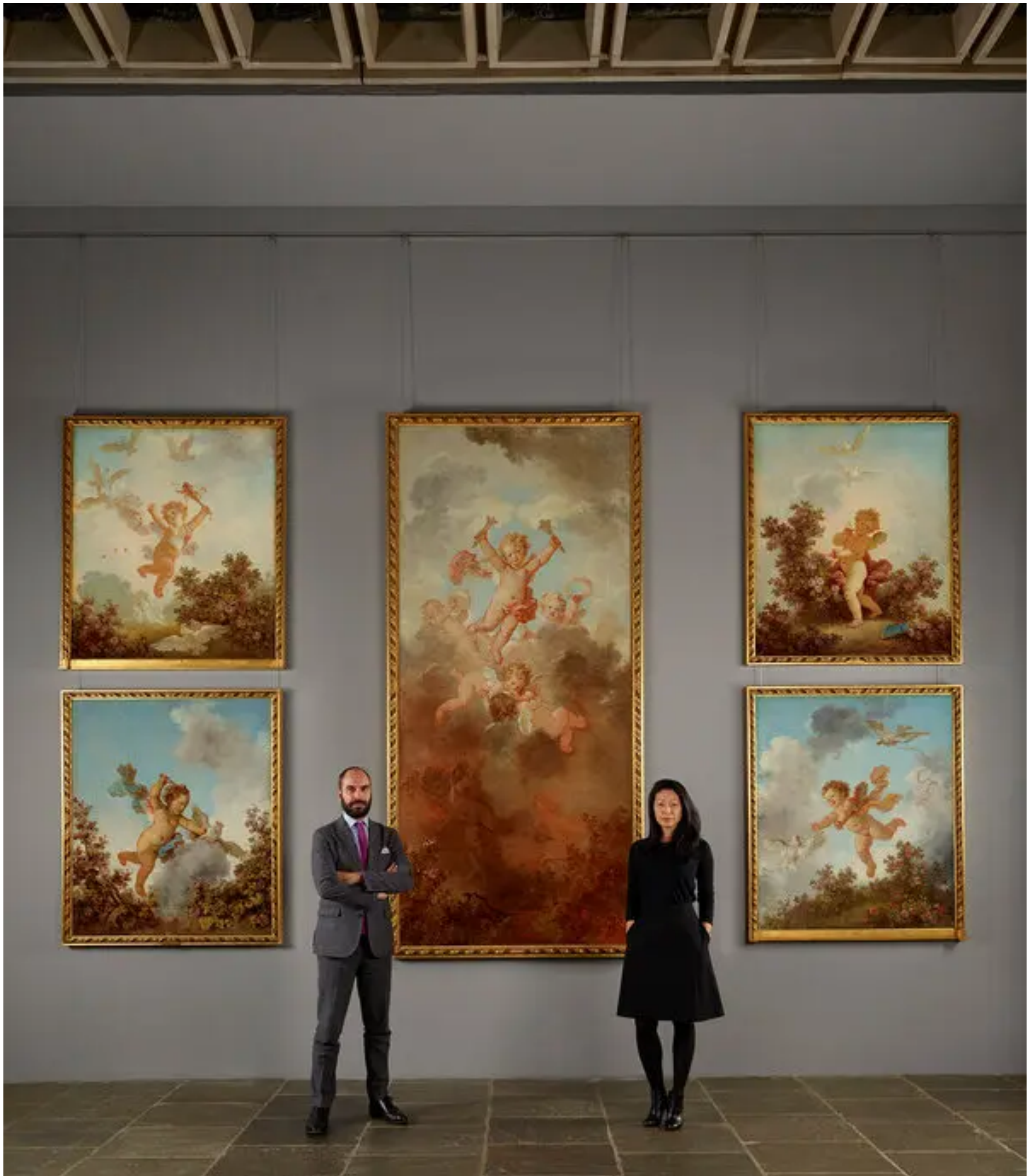
Credit...The Frick Collection; Michael Bodycomb



Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times

For the Breuer project they traveled to inspect two other museums of older art in similarly spartan digs: the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, a Brutalist structure in Lisbon, and the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, a pavilion of concrete designed by Louis Kahn. They were joined in Texas by their partners in the Breuer project, Charlotte Vignon and David Pullins, who've both since left the Frick for new positions. (Two new young hires from Europe, Giulio Dalvit and Marie-Laure Buku Pongo, have participated from afar.)

The vision properly started to crystallize somewhere along Interstate 20 in West Texas, en route from the Kimbell to Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation in the tiny town of Marfa.



Credit...Joe Coscia

“We were stuck in a car together for eight hours,” Ng remembers. “And we went through every iteration, even if we were going to dismiss it out of hand. What if we did it by date of acquisition? How can we treat this collection in a really special way?”

“We even discussed putting damask everywhere and recreating some of the rooms, in a kind of Barnes way,” Salomon adds, referring to the Barnes Collection’s nuts-and-bolts duplication of its founder’s suburban Philadelphia house. “But that lasted about three seconds …”

Another scenario — showing new art with old — also didn’t last long. “This is not a contemporary building,” Salomon says. “It’s a building from the ’60s. It’s a historical building, of a different language than the Beaux-Arts house we work in usually — but we didn’t feel any pressure that, because we’re here, we had to do contemporary.”

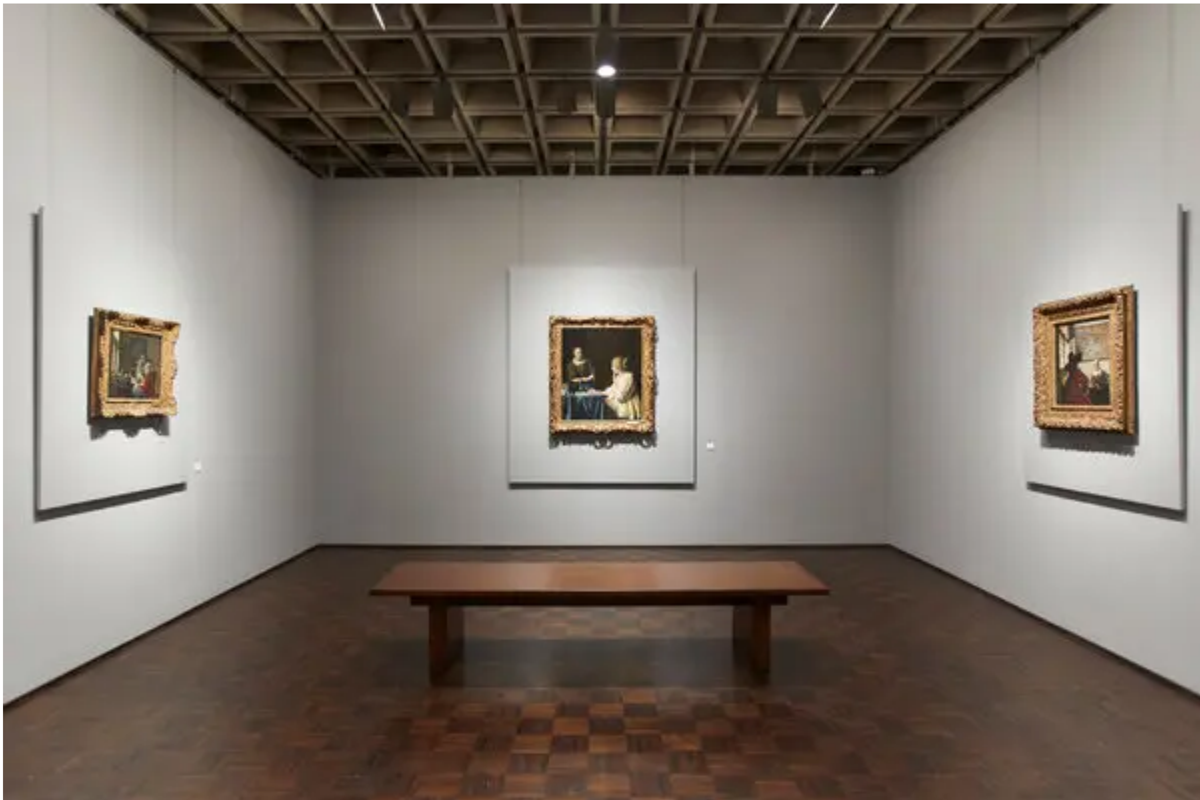
They contemplated Judd’s metal boxes in the Texas scrub grass — and, by the poolside of Marfa’s Thunderbird Hotel, they started sketching. And erasing. “We were going to have four pictures in here, and Aimee was like, ‘No, let’s make it two. Let’s make it one!’” Salomon says.

Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times

“The house is this overload of sensations: fabrics and wood and paintings and objects. We really wanted that Marfa feeling: if you go into a room and you have one piece by Judd, in the same way you can have a huge wall with just one Velázquez. And it holds it, because it’s just so powerful.

“One trustee kept asking me, ‘So, the fabrics are going to be exactly the same as the house, right? There are going to be nice colors on the walls?’ And I had to say, um, no …”

Their minimalism certainly doesn’t sideline more pugnacious gazes on the past. In the new, intimate Vermeer gallery, Ng recalls the blowback she got for her cocktail chat about his “Officer and Laughing Girl.” (She was drinking Dutch jenever.) She had zeroed in on the beaver-pelt hat worn by the Dutchman in the picture’s foreground — a luxury imported from the young colonies of North America, and an undevised emblem of the violence and disease that came with European contact. “Indigenous communities got horribly slammed by that. A horrible, tragic time. I got so many notes from people: ‘I’ve never seen this painting like this before.’ And the amount of crap I got: *You’re politicizing Vermeer!*”



Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times

“People think about old masters as escapism, as looking at pretty old things,” Salomon says.

And yet the past year, isolated from art, reaffirmed their conviction that analysis can be delivered in many formats. What’s scarcer, and dearer, is time and space to see. “If they want to read more, they can. We offer endless programming,” Ng says.

“The gift we’re trying to give people is the ability to look.”

The plan is to keep this display through the next two years. Still, because the Frick had already anticipated becoming a smaller institution — and offered buyouts to staff nearing retirement age just before the pandemic began — the museum has avoided the bloodletting that has devastated personnel at the Met, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, or the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Wardropper took a 20 percent pay cut last year, and other senior staff took reductions of 15 percent; seven full-time employees were laid off in January, but almost all the furloughed security staff is now back at work.)

In an empty gallery, strapped to a dolly, was the most prized picture in the Frick Collection: Bellini’s “St. Francis in the Desert” (circa 1476–78), whose anguished ascetic looks to the sky from an outcropping as grand as an amphitheater. It’s usually seen in the mansion’s study, and before the pandemic Salomon was looking at it with a group of high school students: participants in a program called the Ghetto Film School, which the museum has collaborated with for years.

Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times

To these students from the Bronx, the Renaissance wasn't forbidding at all. " I put them in front of the Bellini, and I say, 'OK, what do you think of this picture?' They've never seen it, they have no idea. 'Do you know who it's by?' No. 'Do you know what it represents?' No. 'Do any of you know who St. Francis is?' No.

"And one kid says, 'It's about the relationship of man and nature.' And another kid says, 'Oh, it's about light.' You got it. You got it."

Now the Bellini has been isolated in a room of its own, in a gallery bare as a monastic cell. Light falls, from the same angle as in the painting, through a small Breuer window that the Whitney and Met often obscured. As I sat in that empty room, the cold February sun streaming in, it felt like a space worth a pilgrimage.

In the Renaissance and in the modern age, in the Bellini and the Breuer, sometimes asceticism is the path to the sublime. "It does make such a provocative little chapel for what has got to be the best painting in the world," Selldorf, the architect, says. "It's a painting that one can just look at forever. But there's a degree of courage in saying: We are going to put this in a totally different circumstance."

Credit...Gus Powell for The New York Times